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SURFACE PROPERTIES AND FINISHING
OF ALUMINIUM CASTING ALLOYS

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ABSTRACT

Aluminium alloys are materials of huge practical importance. However their use is dependent on surface oxides and hydroxides which are critical in protecting the highly reactive underlying metal. The stability and integrity of the oxides and hydroxides are also crucial in finishing and bonding applications. Better understanding of these surfaces has significant implications in enhancing their application.

LM6 and LM25 aluminium-silicon casting alloys were studied as these materials show a particularly inhomogeneous phase structure and complex surface behaviour. This complexity is of fundamental interest and leads to considerable practical difficulties, especially in surface finishing. The surfaces were characterised, subjected to thermal treatments and modified with Ion Assisted Deposition coatings of TiN. A characterisation method for these surfaces was also developed based around the layered structure of aluminium hydroxides.

It was observed that the thermally induced surface segregation of minor elements, such as Mg and Na, is availability-limited. Surface concentrations of these elements are determined by the net effect of enriching via surface segregation and depleting through surface evaporation. The inhomogeneous phase structure of the alloys used in this study enables the observation of two migration processes driven by different forces. Below the oxide dominated surface layer, the migration of Mg is driven by chemical potential gradient and is primarily perpendicular to the surface. Closer to the surface, concentration driven horizontal diffusion of the element occurs.

The deposition of a thin TiN layer has been used to probe the interface. While the deposition conditions of TiN coatings affect the chemistry of the coatings, substrate surface conditions determine how well bonding is achieved between the film and substrate. The height difference between silicon particles in the eutectic phase and the primary aluminium phase of the casting alloys provides surface roughening and optimal adhesion through mechanical interlocking with the coating. This height difference is achieved by preferentially removing the surface exposed primary aluminium phases with ion bombardment.
The nature of surface aluminium oxides and hydroxides and their modification, has been further probed by studying how repeating fragments in TOF-SIMS spectra of these compounds originate. Gibbsite powder and a bayerite layer on a metal surface have been examined, before and after intercalation into their layered structure. This suggests that the weak interlayer bonding can be manipulated and allows cleavage of the outermost octahedral layers under bombardment by energetic particles. This phenomenon provides a new and particularly sensitive characterisation method, using the relative intensities of the repeating fragments in the TOF-SIMS spectra.
To my parents
To my wife, a friend and a colleague of more than fifteen years
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .......................................................................................................................................................... ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ................................................................................................................................. v

TABLE OF CONTENTS ...................................................................................................................................... vi

LIST OF FIGURES ........................................................................................................................................... ix

LIST OF TABLES ............................................................................................................................................... xiii

Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................................. 1

  1.1. Roles of surfaces and interfaces in materials performance ........................................ 1

  1.2. Objectives of this study .............................................................................................................. 2

  1.3. Research focus ............................................................................................................................. 3

Chapter 2. LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................................................................................ 5

  2.1. Characterisation of aluminium surface .................................................................................... 5

    2.1.1. Characterisation of surface acidity and basicity ............................................................ 5

    2.1.2. Characterisation of surface composition ...................................................................... 10

  2.2. Surface segregation in aluminium alloys ............................................................................... 14

    2.2.1. Dynamics of surface segregation .................................................................................. 15

    2.2.2. Kinetics of surface segregation and evaporation ......................................................... 19

  2.3. Surface properties of aluminium alloys ............................................................................... 23

    2.3.1. Surface properties due to composition ........................................................................... 23

    2.3.2. Surface properties due to structure for aluminium oxides ............................................ 24

  2.4. Surface protection and finishing of aluminium alloys .......................................................... 25

    2.4.1. Hard coatings and titanium nitride ................................................................................... 27

    2.4.2. Adhesion between coatings and substrates ................................................................... 29

Chapter 3. EXPERIMENTAL METHODS ..................................................................................................... 32

  3.1. Materials ........................................................................................................................................... 32

    3.1.1. Metal samples .................................................................................................................... 32

    3.1.2. Powder samples .................................................................................................................. 34

  3.2. Sample preparation ......................................................................................................................... 35

    3.2.1. Grinding and polishing ..................................................................................................... 35

    3.2.2. Controlled atmosphere furnace .......................................................................................... 36

    3.2.3. Ion Assisted Deposition (IAD) of thin films ................................................................. 36

    3.2.4. Intercalation of aluminium hydroxide ............................................................................. 37
3.3. Analysis techniques ............................................................................................................. 38
  3.3.1. X-ray Photoelectron Spectroscopy (XPS) ................................................................. 38
  3.3.2. Scanning Electron Microscopy/ Energy Dispersive Spectroscopy (SEM/ EDS) .... 42
  3.3.3. Secondary Ion Mass Spectrometry (SIMS) ................................................................. 43
  3.3.4. X-Ray Diffractometry (XRD) ..................................................................................... 45
  3.3.5. Nano-Indentation ......................................................................................................... 46

Chapter 4. SURFACE SEGREGATION AND EVAPORATION OF TRACE ELEMENTS IN ALUMINIUM CASTING ALLOYS ................................................................. 47
  4.1. Surface segregation and evaporation of Mg and Na in alloy LM6 ......................... 47
  4.2. Surface segregation in alloy LM25 .............................................................................. 55
  4.3. Mathematical model for combined surface segregation and evaporation ......... 57
    4.3.1. Surface segregation equation ................................................................................ 57
    4.3.2. Surface evaporation equation .............................................................................. 60
    4.3.3. Combined mathematical model and fitting with experimental data .............. 61
  4.4. Summary and discussion .............................................................................................. 65

Chapter 5. SURFACE PROPERTIES OF LM6 AND LM25 ALUMINIUM ALLOYS UNDER THERMAL TREATMENT ................................................................. 67
  5.1. Elemental distribution in LM6 resulting from thermal treatment ....................... 68
  5.2. Elemental distribution in LM25 resulting from thermal treatment ....................... 74
  5.3. Oxide evolution on the surface of alloy LM6 ............................................................ 79
  5.4. Summary and discussion .............................................................................................. 80

Chapter 6. SURFACE FINISHING OF ALUMINIUM CASTING ALLOYS ................................................................. 82
  6.1. Characteristics of TiN films grown by IAD ................................................................. 82
  6.2. The interface between TiN films and aluminium substrates .................................. 87
  6.3. The adhesion between TiN films and aluminium substrates .................................. 92
  6.4. Summary and discussion .............................................................................................. 94

Chapter 7. SURFACE PROPERTIES AND COATING APPROACHES ON ALUMINIUM AND ALUMINIUM BASED CASTING ALLOYS ................................................................. 95
  7.1. Chemical, morphological and structural changes of modified gibbsites .............. 96
    7.1.1. Chemical changes ................................................................................................. 96
    7.1.2. Morphological changes ....................................................................................... 98
    7.1.3. Structural changes ............................................................................................ 100
  7.2. The repeating fragments in TOF-SIMS spectra ..................................................... 103
7.3. Surface modification by ion bombardment ................................................. 109
7.4. Characterisation of surface species using repeating fragments .......... 119
7.5. Summary and discussion ............................................................................. 124

Chapter 8. CONCLUSIONS ............................................................................... 126

APPENDIX A – Plasmon peaks and the quantification of XPS data for aluminium – silicon alloys .............................................................................................................. 129

APPENDIX B – Solution to the equation for the combined effects of surface segregation and evaporation ................................................................. 140

REFERENCES ........................................................................................................ 144
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1. Schematic of surface hydroxylation and charging in aqueous environment ........................................................................................................................................................................6
Figure 2.2. Sites with lower acidity and higher basicity due to surrounding ions ....7
Figure 2.3. Relative abundance (against 100 as the intensity of AlO$_2^-$) of the most intense TOF-SIMS negative fragments [26] .........................................................................................................................................................13
Figure 2.4. Diffusion model of Mg in Al alloys [42] .........................................................................................................................................................................................17
Figure 2.5. The depth profile of segregant proposed by previous workers ........20
Figure 2.6. Universal segregation – evaporation curve of Al-0.8%Mg alloy [2] ....22
Figure 2.7. Schematic of Ion Assisted Deposition (IAD) .......................................29
Figure 2.8. Microscopic evaluation of scratch line (above) [91], and matching with the plot of increasing load [94] ..........................................................................................................................................................................................31
Figure 3.1. Inhomogeneous phase structures of LM6 (above) and LM25 casting alloys observed in etched surfaces under SEM ..................................................................................................................................................................33
Figure 4.1. SEM/ EDS line scan across an inter-metallic phase of LM6 before heating ........................................................................................................................................................................................................48
Figure 4.2. SEM/ EDS spot scan on inter-metallic phase of LM6 after heating ....49
Figure 4.3. Typical DSIMS depth profiles of LM6 after heating ..........................50
Figure 4.4. Typical XPS depth profile of LM6 after heating...............................51
Figure 4.5. Variation in the contents of minor elements in LM6 after heating ......52
Figure 4.6. Ternary phase diagram Al-Si-Mg [101] ..............................................53
Figure 4.7. TOF-SIMS elemental map of LM6 after heating ..............................54
Figure 4.8. XPS narrow scan (a) Mg 2p; (b) C 1s .................................................55
Figure 4.9. Typical DSIMS profiles of LM25 before and after heating to 440 ºC ....56
Figure 4.10. Diffusion model based on diffusion potential and a growing oxide layer ..........................................................................................................................................................................................59
Figure 4.11. Fitted model for the film growth constant n at 400°C .......................62
Figure 4.12. Fitted model for Mg segregation in the temperature range between 320 and 480 ºC ........................................................................................................................................................................63
Figure 4.13. Fitted model for Na segregation in the temperature range between 320 and 480 ºC ........................................................................................................................................................................64
Figure 5.1. DSIMS depth profile of unheated LM6

Figure 5.2. DSIMS elemental maps of unheated LM6 showing images at three depths into the sample.

Figure 5.3. Oxide thicknesses calculated from Strohmeier’s formula for LM6 samples heated to 400°C for 60 minutes and 440°C for 360 minutes.

Figure 5.4. DSIMS depth profile of LM6 heated to 400°C for 60 minutes.

Figure 5.5. DSIMS elemental maps of LM6 heated to 400°C for 60 minutes.

Figure 5.6. DSIMS depth profile of LM6 heated to 440°C for 360 minutes.

Figure 5.7. DSIMS elemental maps of LM6 heated to 440°C for 360 minutes.

Figure 5.8. DSIMS depth profile of LM25 unheated.

Figure 5.9. DSIMS elemental maps of LM25 unheated.

Figure 5.10. DSIMS depth profile of LM25 heated to 440°C for 60 minutes.

Figure 5.11. DSIMS elemental maps of LM25 heated to 440°C for 60 minutes.

Figure 5.12. DSIMS depth profile of LM25 heated to 440°C for 24 hours.

Figure 5.13. DSIMS elemental maps of LM25 heated to 440°C for 24 hours.

Figure 5.14. TOF-SIMS images of LM6 surface – sputter cleaned and re-oxidised in high vacuum.

Figure 6.1. TEM images of the cross sections of the coatings resulted from Runs #2 and #3.

Figure 6.2. TEM/EDS elemental mapping of the coating resulted from Run #2.

Figure 6.3. XPS narrow scans of the Ti 2p and N 1s regions of IAD grown TiN films.

Figure 6.4. DSIMS depth profiles of TiN coatings on LM6 and LM25.

Figure 6.5. Schematic of the interface between a TiN coating and a substrate of an aluminium casting alloy.

Figure 6.6. SEM images showing Si particles exposed on the substrate surfaces.

Figure 6.7. Topography of the TiN coatings on different substrates.

Figure 6.8. Scratch lines on the coatings (Run #3) on high purity aluminium (above), and on LM25.

Figure 7.1. XPS survey spectra of Fe-modified gibbsite (lower) and the original.

Figure 7.2. XPS O 1s and Fe 2p narrow scans of Fe-modified gibbsite.

Figure 7.3. SEM images of (a) original; (b) Na-modified; (c) Fe modified gibbsite.

Figure 7.4. XRD spectra of original and Fe-modified gibbsites.

Figure 7.5. Rietveld refinement results of synchrotron diffraction data.
Figure 7.6. TOF-SIMS spectrum of original gibbsite with clear intermediate peaks 105
Figure 7.7. TOF-SIMS spectrum of Na-modified gibbsite showing weaker
intermediate peaks .....................................................................................................106
Figure 7.8. TOF-SIMS spectrum of Fe-modified gibbsite showing insignificant
intermediate peaks .....................................................................................................107
Figure 7.9. Schematic of proposed origins of repeating fragments in TOF-SIMS
spectra of gibbsite ......................................................................................................108
Figure 7.10. The effect of sputtering by Cs⁺ on repeating patterns of hydroxylated and
modified surface of high purity aluminium ...............................................................111
Figure 7.11. TOF-SIMS spectra of hydroxylated surface of high purity aluminium
before and after sputtering .........................................................................................112
Figure 7.12. TOF-SIMS spectra of hydroxylated and modified surface of high purity
aluminium before and after sputtering .......................................................................113
Figure 7.13. TOF-SIMS spectrum of hydroxylated and modified surface of high
purity aluminium showing new families of repeating fragments ..............................114
Figure 7.14. TOF-SIMS spectra of hydroxylated surface of LM6 casting alloy before
and after sputtering .................................................................................................116
Figure 7.15. TOF-SIMS spectra of hydroxylated and modified surface of LM6 casting
alloy before and after sputtering .............................................................................117
Figure 7.16. TOF-SIMS spectrum of hydroxylated and modified surface of LM6
casting alloy showing new families of repeating fragments .................................118
Figure 7.17. Exponentially fitted trends of abundance of (Al₂O₃)xAlO₂⁻ fragments for
gibbsite powders ......................................................................................................120
Figure 7.18. Exponentially fitted trends of abundance of (Al₂O₃)xAlO₂⁻ fragments for
gibbsite powder (unmodified) and the hydroxylated and modified surfaces of high
purity aluminium and LM6 alloy (before sputtering) ..............................................121
Figure 7.19. Exponentially fitted trends of abundance of (Al₂O₃)xAlO₂⁻ fragments for
hydroxylated surface of high purity aluminium – before and after sputtering ..........122
Figure 7.20. Exponentially fitted trends of abundance of (Al₂O₃)xAlO₂⁻ fragments for
hydroxylated and modified surface of high purity aluminium – before and after
sputtering ...................................................................................................................123
Figure 7.21. Exponentially fitted trends of abundance of (Al₂O₃)xAlO₂⁻ fragments for
hydroxylated surface of LM6 alloy – before and after sputtering ...........................123
Figure 7.22. Exponentially fitted trends of abundance of \((\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3)_x\text{AlO}_2^-\) fragments for hydroxylated and modified surface of LM6 alloy – before and after sputtering. 124
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1. Designations of the alloys used in this study ................................................ 2
Table 2.1. Ranges of binding energy reported for aluminium oxides and hydroxides 10
Table 2.2. Fragments inferred to appear in the TOF-SIMS spectra of oxide M-O [24] ........................... 12
Table 2.3. Summary of works done in surface segregation of Mg in Al alloys .......... 18
Table 2.4. Acid – base properties of some oxides [66] ........................................... 24
Table 2.5. Guide to selection of finishes for casting alloys [72] ............................. 26
Table 3.1. Bulk composition of LM6 and LM25 casting alloys (weight %) .......... 32
Table 3.2. Bulk composition of LM6 and LM25 casting alloys (atomic % approximately) ......................................................... 32
Table 3.3. Parameters of TiN deposition runs ......................................................... 37
Table 3.4. Typical XPS analysis sequence .......................................................... 41
Table 4.1. Parameters of the mathematical model for Mg segregation ................. 64
Table 4.2. Parameters of the mathematical model for Na segregation and evaporation ........................................................................................................... 65
Table 6.1. Identification of the deconvoluted peaks in Figure 6.3. ....................... 86
Table 6.2. Calculation of Ti:N stoichiometry for TiN (excluding oxynitride) .......... 86
Table 6.3. Calculation of Ti:N stoichiometry for TiOxNy (excluding nitride) .......... 87
Table 6.4. Characteristics of the TiN coatings grown by IAD ............................. 87
Table 7.1. Summary of the Rietveld refinement results of gibbsites .................... 103